

The God Who Wasn't There (And The One Who Was)

"I was doing some research into the idea that Jesus never existed. When I first looked into it, I thought it was just a crackpot theory and I was curious why anyone would believe this," explains Brian Flemming. "To my surprise I found the evidence kept stacking up. The more I looked into it, the more that the facts aligned with those who said Jesus was just a legendary character. The shaky evidence and the poor reasoning were actually on the side of those who said that Jesus did exist."

And so Flemming (*Bat Boy: The Musical*, *Nothing So Strange*, *Fair & Balanced*, and all-around digital rights supporter) decided to make a movie. The result, which is currently being screened across the country in theaters and at atheist organizations and will be released on DVD soon, is a shockingly good film.

Flemming begins at the beginning: the popular story of Jesus. In a hilarious montage of old footage taken from the Prelinger archives underneath deadpan narration, he tells the story in six minutes. And then it's on to debunking it. Through interviews with various experts, illustrated with entertaining graphics, he tries to reconstruct the historical evidence for the story...only to find there isn't much and a lot doesn't add up.

Convinced the story is wrong, Flemming takes aim at the right-wing Christian fundamentalists who act based on it, the wishy-washy Christian moderates who enable them, and the rest of the system. He concludes by heading back home to the fundamentalist Christian school he attended as a child to confront the principal about what he's teaching children.

Flemming's previous film, *Nothing So Strange* ([which I also reviewed](#)) was interesting but, in fairness, rather amateurish. No such criticism can be made of this film, which has some of the best graphics I've seen in a documentary and a brilliant score composed from the Creative Commons-licensed Wired CD by the hertofore-unknown DJ Madson (a nom-de-plume of Flemming, I'm beginning to suspect) by remixing popular artists. The whole thing, from the interviews down to the promotional posters, hangs together so well that it's hard to believe Flemming is doing this all himself, but apparently he is, with no liberal atheist conspiracy to back him.

(Although, in full disclosure, Larry Lessig and former Creative Commons executive director Glenn Otis Brown receive special thanks in the credits. And in a remote Q&A via iChat after the screening here at Stanford, Flemming was wearing a Creative Commons shirt. So if you want to investigate a conspiracy, that's where I'd look.)

On the other hand, Flemming has always had what Bill O'Reilly might call a "parasitic" sense of self-promotion. His film *Nothing So Strange* received press largely because it included scenes of Bill Gates being assassinated. And during the California Recall, Flemming jumped into the fray on the platform "If elected, I will resign." (Thus making Lt. Governor Bustamante governor, since at the time he was refusing to run, thinking he'd draw support away from the actual governor.) When FOX sued Al Franken for using the phrase "Fair and Balanced", Flemming wrote a play with the name. When Arnold Schwarzenegger sued the makers of a bobblehead version of him, Flemming posted a photo of Arnold's penis.

Both times, he insisted the works were a form of political protest, but he still charged money for the products. He did the same when he released portions of *Nothing So Strange* under a Creative Commons license. It's one thing to support free speech; it's another to try to make money off of other people's support for it. What's unsettling about this film is not how Flemming is using various atheist groups to screen and promote it — that's perfectly reasonable, especially since he's giving the DVDs to the groups at outrageously low prices.

No, what's unsettling is a hidden feature on Flemming's site called the Grassroots Promotion Team or GPT. In general these things are nothing new — just personally, I remember volunteering for Apple when the iMac came out and joining a "Street Team" website to promote a Buffy DVD. The idea behind such sites is that your particular group of obsessive lonely fans will spend their free time promoting your products on various forums and websites in exchange for a chance to win some lame prizes.

It's sad when big corporations do this, but when independent political folks like Flemming do it, it becomes a little creepy. It's also problematic. Take the movie's soundtrack, which is sold on Amazon. Normally such obscure CDs have hardly any reviews. But this one not only had 11, but they were all amazingly glowing. "Wow, this CD must be really good," I thought. But when I saw Flemming was awarding 100 "points" for each Amazon review, it suddenly made sense. If everyone plays this game, Amazon reviews will quickly become meaningless, which is why I don't think it's a very good idea to start.

The film is valuable and grassroots promotion of it is certainly a good thing. I just wish it felt a little less like using well-meaning people to make money for Flemming and a little more like a cooperative community with the aim of spreading the Real News.

Brian Flemming responds:

Thanks for the kind words about the movie. I agree with some of your criticism of the street team, but I think your aim is off the mark with much of it.

AMAZON REVIEWS. There's an old phrase in publicity, "I don't care if the review is positive or negative, just put the title in the headline." As an indie filmmaker always struggling to get the word out against competing messages backed by tens of millions of dollars, I definitely subscribe to this philosophy. It was never the design of the movie's street team to load up Amazon with praise (frankly, a mix of angry one-star reviews and passionate five-star reviews would be better). It's no secret that authors and their publishers and friends stack the Amazon book reviews (as has been documented), but I don't wish to add to that clutter. I've never asked anyone to post nice things on Amazon about the soundtrack CD for *The God Who Wasn't There*, or to withhold negative statements (and I have not posted a review myself). Street team members are given a free (digital) copy of the soundtrack and encouraged to go to Amazon and post a review of the music—that's it. About 5% of them do. There's no incentive to make the review positive or negative. However, while I think the street team members' reviews of the soundtrack CD on Amazon are sincere, and no harm has been done, this particular sample does naturally skew positive—if you're on the street team, you probably like the film/soundtrack you've decided to back with your time. But then again, reviews are inherently biased—and fans tend to be more motivated than others in posting. Most reviews on Amazon for most media products are positive for that reason. I'll freely admit to sending people to Amazon—but my goal is battling obscurity, not battling negative opinion. And I certainly can't stop anyone from posting a negative review.

THE STREET TEAM ITSELF. A "street team" is a group of volunteer supporters who distribute flyers and stickers and otherwise spread the word about a band or film online and offline. You say, "It's sad when big corporations do this, but when independent political folks like Flemming do it, it becomes a little creepy." Here's where I think your aim is considerably off the mark. To be opposed to a street team is nearly tantamount to being opposed to the very idea of promoting indie

artists. I believe promotion should be honest and ethical, but promotion itself is not an evil. And organizing promotion is not an evil. To eliminate street teams would be largely to give up and turn over the marketplace to those who have the money to promote via advertising and other expensive means. It would strengthen messages backed by money and weaken messages backed by passion. I think the street team for The God Who Wasn't There is a great example of passion being organized into action, and I'm proud of it. I give theatrical rights away for free—and then a group like SF Atheists holds a screening and earns upwards of \$1000 to help their extremely important efforts. Volunteers go to a website where grassroots action is made easier—and conversations all over the web get started over whether Jesus really did exist, a very legitimate question that is nonetheless the third rail of mainstream-media conversations about Christianity. Street teams aren't "creepy," and this one in particular is doing some very real, verifiable good.

MONEY. You write that when I attacked Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bill O'Reilly via Fair Use Press, I "insisted the works were a form of political protest, but [Flemming] still charged money for the products. He did the same when he released portions of Nothing So Strange under a Creative Commons license. It's one thing to support free speech; it's another to try to make money off of other people's support for it." Really, I'm just shaking my head in wonder at this accusation. I have never made any profit whatsoever from any of my Fair Use Press e-books. The Schwarzenegger attack was given away, with a high-res "premium" edition sold at first for \$1 (both editions are free now and have been for about a year). I added a \$1 price to that specifically to demonstrate fair use—that I wasn't taking a "noncommercial" copout, so Schwarzenegger and his attorney couldn't claim that's why they didn't sue. That's what my activism through Fair Use Press is about—demonstrating the limits of fair use. I want people to look at what I do, see that I got away with it, and then do more of the same. The commercial marketplace—where messages like Bill O'Reilly's already live—is an important battlefield in this fight. Just because I fight in that space doesn't mean I'm making a profit from Fair Use Press. I don't, and it certainly isn't part of the plan (I spend far more on promotion and advertising than I take in). And my best-case scenario for The God Who Wasn't There is to break even on marketing expenses (production costs are already written off, gladly, as a loss). All of my indie-film work and free-culture activism operates in the red, subsidized by the Hollywood work-for-hire assignments I take that also pay my rent. I'm not, as you say, "using well-meaning people to make money." I'm putting in my own money and time to the same purpose as the people I'm working side-by-side with. The fact that we earn revenue to try to keep the project somewhat self-sustaining cannot reasonably be termed exploitation.

Criticism is a good thing, Aaron, and we free-culture activists of course do need to criticize each other where criticism is justified. And I certainly should be held publicly accountable for anything I publicly do. But in this case I really think you've gone overboard and made accusations that have little merit.

Aaron replies:

Thanks for responding. I can't say I'm *glad* to hear you don't expect to turn a profit on any of this, but it certainly allays any fears of exploitation.

But I feel like you missed my main point about the street team — the one I ended the article with: "I just wish it felt ... a little more like a cooperative community with the aim of spreading the Real News." There's nothing wrong with telling people about music or movies you like, or even putting up posters to promote them. Where it gets creepy is when this natural enthusiasm is co-opted and channeled into a structured, top-down sort of system. Now I'm not just expressing my opinions, I'm following orders so I can get goodies. That fundamentally changes things.

Maybe an analogy will help. My mom likes telling people about interesting things I've done. There's nothing wrong with this — the people she talks to like knowing this stuff. But you have to admit it would be creepy if I started providing my mom with a list of my achievements and awarding her points every time she found a way to mention them. Mom begins to feel used, her friends begin to feel duped, and I look like a narcissist.

There's no need to get rid of the promotion system, just scale it back a little. Provide a list of suggested actions, a forum where people can talk about what they're doing, and then offer to mail a t-shirt or something to people who work hard.

You see, contrary to popular opinion — even in the free culture community, oddly enough — rewards are incredibly destructive. Study after study shows they actually *demotivate* people, encourage people to cheat and lie, and cause them to make stupid decisions about trade-offs. For an excellent book on the subject, see *Alfie Kohn's Punished By Rewards*.

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